

Things I learned from Jerry

Jerry Marwell, a friend, colleague and mentor but mostly (to me) a great supporter of mine, passed away recently. He was someone who studied collective actions problems and their solutions, and was able to put into practice principles that make a whole greater than the sum of its parts. As one of the many tributes he deserves, I wanted to pass on some thing I learned from him (though maybe some were from others, like Erik Wright and Bob Hauser) about how to have a decent department.

- 1) **The principle of good faith.** In discussions, take for granted that others are saying what they honestly believe is for the collective good. Our job is to consider their ideas impartially and put forward our own—not to explain them, or explain them away. Amazingly, this rule makes itself true: you will find your colleagues *do* deserve the good faith you extend.
- 2) **What to look for.** It turns out to be very easy to find the flaws in other people and their work. People often think that there is some sort of hierarchy in which if *A* can effectively criticize *B*, that must mean that the quality of *A* is higher than that of *B*. But it just isn't true. Your own work can stink and you can still be a ruthless and correct critic of others. Because we all fall short of the glory of God, it's really easy to show how someone stinks, infinitely.

What's really hard is to figure out who is good, and who has a chance of getting better. And whose strengths aren't simply the absence of easy to identify weaknesses.

When we were on the verge of losing someone because critics were piling on to someone good, one of my colleagues tried to make everyone happy by saying that it was a case of the best being the enemy of the good. In this case, that was actually valid. But more often, it's the good, the average, and the mediocre thinking that by being the enemy of the good, they become the best.

- 3) **Valuing the time we spend together.** It is important to signal that even though we have other interests and activities, other friends and family, we really value one another's company. We aren't always itching to leave any room in which we are assembled. Again, this makes itself true—by putting value in, we find there is value waiting there next time we come. Plus see (6) below. Simple things like coming to meetings are a collective action paradox—it's in each's individual interest to show up last, but at the cost of wasting everyone else's time. But even more, if your way to signal that you are important is to minimize your consideration of others, even in so simple a matter as to show your importance by coming late to a collective meeting, a department begins a race

to the bottom in which the only equilibrium is one in which you have all demonstrated to one another that what you actually do and are is worthless.

- 4) **Your colleagues are your supporters, not your rivals.** Departments go up together, or they go down together. You **want** your colleagues to get raises—it doesn't come out of your pocket and in most places, it only increases the chances of you getting a raise (because of equity [aka pity] concerns). You want your students to think that your colleagues are great, as opposed to wondering, "why did I come here?" You want your colleagues to get acclaim—in fact, you want them to be overrated. That is, conditional on their actual quality, you want them to be as seen as highly as possible by others. Conditional on your own quality, you want to be in a department where you are the worst. (Of course, conditional on *their* quality, you want to be the best....)
- 5) **You look fat in that dress.** Honesty is never a good cover for being mean. But there are times when people confuse politeness with cowardice, and end up not fulfilling their responsibilities. Don't tell your friends that a dress makes them look fat, but if you were, say, a fashion photographer, you wouldn't be doing your job if you let folks wear horizontal stripes, would you? When you are asked to evaluate someone, be honest. When you think a group is going in the wrong direction, be honest. If you have bad news for someone, look him or her in the eye and deliver it.
- 6) **Play to your weaknesses.** Not always, but in some intellectual matters, this is vital. Jerry had an opinion on many things, but he was no broken record. He came to talk to people about things that *they* knew more about than he. He wasn't interested in showing off what he knew; he wanted to focus on the areas in which he was weakest, so that he could learn. He'd say ten things, knowing three or four would be dead wrong, but the only way to know which was to get other people involved. As a result, he was helping himself and others grow, and he gained our deep respect for his honesty and curiosity, not a shallow one based on his expertise.

And now I want to pass on two other important things in the importantly pithy form that I got from Ron Burt. They give a nice phrasing for principles that are relevant for Jerry's ideas.

- 7) **People go where the value is.** If someone is making good things happen, and value is being created, other people will flock there. Someone who helps others prosper will be surrounded by others like a kid with bread at the goose pond. And if you want someone to do something, make them feel good about it. If you indicate that some sort of work is devalued and unimportant, no one will do it. Seems simple, but universities can make someone feel unimportant for doing something (such as teaching a large number of undergraduates) that actually creates a great deal of revenue for the university, and make someone else feel very important for doing something that is of much less importance

(such as getting a grant with low overhead that is used to pay an off-site agency, basically yielding nothing for the university). And then they wonder why they have a hard time getting people to pitch in to make ends meet.

But this also means that when we value the time we spend together, and make value there, other people come. We don't help ourselves when, to save an hour a week for our own work, we impoverish the collective—and hence have a department that doesn't draw in enthusiastic people, especially graduate students. You have a lot more to show for that week when the time is spent with enthusiastic and excellent students, than when that hour you saved is spent pulling a large weight around.

Collective action problems are real, but they're not insoluble—as Jerry showed, people solve them all the time. There's nothing silly or unrealistic about talking about ideas that should guide our action: universities are all about turning ideas into reality. If they can't do that, I'm not sure if they have such a great claim to exist.

- 8) **Don't double over.** When someone is “sucker-punched”—a blow to an unprotected belly—his instinct is to double over and shrink in like a snail going into a shell. If someone hurts us, we tend to do the same thing: retreat, pull in our feelers, and lose contact with folks. The relevance for Jerry's principles is this: With withdrawal, we come into the office less, spend less time with our colleagues. All this makes things worse. We brood and magnify problems, we lose track of people who might make us feel better, and convert them into imaginary enemies. And we make it impossible to build up a stock of good experiences to outweigh the bad. Chances are that if we run into the person we thought was out to get us, we'll simply realize that we were wrong.